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ABSTRACT

The research project described in this paper concerned the application of attribution theory and its underlying principles to the consultation process and activities of special and regular education teachers. In recent years, consultation between teachers for the "mainstreaming" of disabled and/or handicapped students into general education has been the preferred practice but little is understood of the consultation dynamics. An examination was made of the types and patterns of attributions made on consultation outcomes among 75 teachers as they effect the mainstreaming process within their own schools. The application of attribution principles helps to shed light on the reasons and causes for failure or success. (JD)

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ATTRIBUTIONS ABOUT CONSULTATION OUTCOMES BY SPECIAL AND REGULAR EDUCATION TEACHERS

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Abstract

Seventy-five elementary, middle and junior high public school teachers from southwestern Pennsylvania responded to the Attribution Survey Questionnaire (ASQ) which was designed to elicit responses from participants for two consultation outcome conditions: (1) Successful; and (2) Unsuccessful (Failure). Participants based their responses on previous consultation experiences for facilitating the mainstreaming of disabled or handicapped students into regular education classes. Type and pattern of attributions were analyzed for both consultation outcome conditions. Results indicated that special and regular education teachers differed significantly in their type and pattern of attributions for unsuccessful consultation outcomes, X^2 (1, N = 38) = 14.51, $p<.05$, X^2 (2, N = 75) = 16.83, $p<.05$, while no significant differences were found for successful consultation outcomes, X^2 (2, N = 75) = 1.18, $p<.05$, X^2 (1, N = 65) = 3.62, $p<.05$. Data from this study support the contention made by attribution theorists and researchers that the actor-observer perceptual difference exists in the perceptions of teachers involved in consultation relationships.

Attributions About Consultation Outcomes by Special and Regular Education Teachers

In recent years, special and regular education teachers have been involved in consultation relationships for the mainstreaming of disabled and handicapped students into regular education classes. Consultations between teachers have been viewed by educational professionals as helping in effecting the mainstreaming process (Idol-Maestas, 1983; Friend, 1985; Idol-Maestas & Ritter, 1985). If the teacher-consultant is successful and the teacher-consultee develops appropriate problem-solving skills and competencies, then both could gain confidence in effecting the mainstreaming process on a very cooperative level. The teacher-consultant could count on the teacher-consultee to continue to accept and work with other exceptional students in the future, while the teacher-consultee could feel confident to independently solve the problems encountered by these students in the mainstream classes. Thus, the consultation process could be viewed as an important intervention strategy for effecting the success of mainstreaming exceptional students more efficiently in the future (Idol-Maestas, 1983; Rosenfield, 1985; Graden, 1985; Pugach & Allen-Meares, 1985).

Many researchers and professionals have made speculations as to why some consultation activities between teachers have worked while others have not worked (Martin & Curtis, 1981; Idol-

Maestas, Paolucci-Whitcomb, & Nevin, 1986). Very little research has been done to investigate the causes of failure or success in consultation relationships between teachers. One way to understand the causes is to examine how both teachers perceive the consultation process and the outcomes of their efforts.

Attribution theory has been used to help describe the causal explanations of student performance and achievement outcomes relative to teacher-student work relationship patterns. Most studies of this structure have focussed on the types of attributions made by teachers and their students. Evidence suggests that teachers most often attribute successful student performance and achievement outcomes to their own efforts and unsuccessful student performance and achievement outcomes more frequently to their students (e.g., Beckman, 1970; Beckman, 1973; Brandt, Hayden, & Brophy, 1975). Researchers have suggested the application of attribution theory to help understand the causes of consultation outcomes between teachers. Particular attention has been placed on examining the type and pattern of attributions made by teachers as they evaluate the success or failure of their efforts (Martin, 1983; Martin & Curtis, 1981).

Theoretical Framework

Heider (1958) proposed that a person's perception is a function of his or her perceived position in the social situation. An individual's perception about a particular event, action, or behavior, is dependent upon that individual's degree

of involvement. The difference is found in the two types of perceptions: (1) actor; and (2) observer. An actor is the person involved in the event, action or whose behavior is in question at the moment of perception. An observer is that person who observes the actor's behavior and who is not necessarily involved in the event, action, or behavior but perceives the actor's behavior.

According to attribution theorists, actors tend to attribute causality more frequently to external factors than to themselves (Heider, 1958). On the other hand, observers tend to focus more on the actor's internal attributes for causality of an unsuccessful outcome. When outcomes are successful, both actors and observers tend to attribute causality on a similar level: actors claim credit by exalting their skills and competencies and observers give more credit to actors while focussing on the actor's internal attributes for the successful outcomes.

Researchers who have investigated teacher-student attributions have demonstrated the existence of the actor-observer perceptions in the teacher-student relationship. Because the consultant-consultee relationship is parallel to the teacher-student relationship, the application of the same perceptual hypothesis would be appropriate to examining the consultation relationships between teachers. Thus, the purpose of this study was to determine the existence of the actor-observer perceptual difference between special and regular

education teachers. The assumption made was that special education teachers behave as consultants while regular education teachers behave as consultees for the mainstreaming of exceptional students into regular education classes. The problems encountered by these teachers during the consultation activity could be a function of the presence of the actor-observer perception. In addition, this difference could affect teacher behaviors and responses to the mainstreaming and consultation processes.

Method

Instrumentation

The instrument developed for this study was the Attribution Survey Questionnaire (ASQ) which consisted of 20 causal statements frequently mentioned in the consultation literature as contributing to successful or unsuccessful consultation outcomes (e.g., lack of administrative support; difficulty in the mainstreaming process; the lack of student preparation; etc.). The ASQ was divided into two parts: (1) Successful; and (2) Unsuccessful, with each part containing the same 20 causal statements assigned randomly in each part. Statements were validated by field experts who were knowledgeable in attribution and consultation theories. Several of the statements were negated to serve as check items. An open-ended question also was listed in both parts. Reliability of the ASQ was established through a field test on a sample of 20 special and regular

education teachers who had previous consultation experiences for the mainstreaming of exceptional students into regular education classes.

Task

There were four specific tasks for respondents in the ASQ. First, respondents were asked to define what they perceived to be a successful consultation outcome. Defining their own perception of success or failure provided some measure of internal control and helped to provide the framework for responding to the causal statement items which followed. Second, respondents were asked to think of their most successful consultation outcome for the mainstreaming of exceptional students into regular education classes. Using this particular case in mind, respondents then were asked to agree or disagree to each of the following causal statements in relation to the final outcome of that consultation. Finally, respondents were asked to identify the most significant factor which contributed to the final outcome of the consultation which they had in mind. The same procedure was used for the second part of the ASQ but for an extreme case of an unsuccessful or failed consultation outcome.

Survey items were classified into two types of attributions: internal and external, and further subdivided into three clusters: (1) internal to self; (2) internal to one's own consulting partner; and (3) external to both parties and the

consultation relationship. Internal causal statements reflected those factors or variables that were related to an individual's characteristic, disposition, or personality trait in relation to the causal analysis of both their behavior and the behavior of their consulting partner. Survey items classified as external reflected those factors or variables that were not related to an individual's character, disposition, or personality trait, but were outside the individual's control in relation to the causal analysis of their behavior and the behavior of their consulting partner.

Selection Sample

A systematic random selection process was used to identify teachers from a master list compiled for the research study. The selection process yielded a total of 107 public school teachers who then were individually solicited for participation. The sample comprised those elementary, middle, or junior high school special and regular education teachers who have engaged or participated in consultation activities. Special education teachers selected were matched with their regular education counterparts within their buildings. Thus, for every special education teacher selected in the building there was at least one regular education teacher selected in the same building who had engaged in consultation activities for the mainstreaming of exceptional students into regular education classes.

Survey Distribution

Selected teachers were mailed their survey materials through their school building principals. Potential respondents were asked to mail their completed surveys directly to the researcher. Follow-up procedures were conducted two weeks after the first mailing. Teachers who did not respond were contacted by telephone and told of the importance of their participation.

Data Analyses

Participant Characteristics

Characteristics of participants were collected from a Demographic Information Sheet (DIS) mailed along with each survey questionnaire. The DIS contained specific questions about exact teaching position, grade level taught, teacher certifications, and type of classroom. This information was crucial to the study particularly in eliminating those respondents who had not engaged in consultation relationships with special and regular education teachers.

Consultation Experiences

To determine whether respondents had previous consultation experiences, they were asked to check YES or NO on items (i) and (j) of the DIS. These items were critical for the purpose of the study since it was important that the teacher respondents have engaged in consultation activities. In this way, it was assumed that these teachers would have had at least some success and failure experiences in their consultation activities and a higher probability for completing the survey questionnaire. The surveys

of those teachers who indicated No on item (j) were not used for the data analyses.

Type of Attributions

Type of attributions was determined by an examination of a respondent's written response to the open-ended question in each part of the ASQ. These written responses were then classified into various categories. Reliability of the classification scheme was conducted by asking independent raters to classify each response into three categories: (1) self; (2) consulting partner; and (3) other or external to the consulting relationship. Interrater reliability was computed first by randomly selecting 30% of the responses and asking each rater to classify each response into the three categories. If a response fell between two categories, it was counted for both. The number of agreements between each rater for each response was then determined and computed by using the following formula:

$$\frac{\text{Number of Agreements}}{\text{Number of raters}} \times 100 = \% \text{ of Reliability}$$

Mean interrater reliability was computed at 0.89. Raters and researcher reliability was computed at 0.87. Response frequencies for each category were calculated for a contingency table to determine attribution type between the two groups of respondents. The Chi-Square statistic was used for the analysis.

Pattern of Attributions

Pattern of attributions was determined by an analysis of a respondent's actual proportions of agree and disagree responses for each of the three clusters of causal statements and in matching the hypothesized direction of credit or blame. Research hypotheses were stated as inequality statements and in the theorized direction of credit or blame indicated by the greater than (>) signs.

For example, it was predicted that in the successful outcome condition, both regular and special education teachers would attribute the cause of success more frequently and first to themselves, then to their consulting partner, and then to other factors. Thus, the inequality statements and pattern of attribution were SE > RE > E for the special education teacher, and RE > SE > E for the regular education teacher. And for the unsuccessful or failed consultation outcome condition, the inequality statements were RE >E > SE for the special education teacher, and SE > E > RE for the regular education teacher. RE stood for the regular education teacher and SE for the special education teacher, while E stood for external factors.

Each respondent had a proportion for each cluster of causal statements. When a respondent's proportion for each cluster matched the stated direction of the hypothesized pattern, the respondent was classified under the YES column of a contingency table. When there was no match, the respondent was classified under the NO column. The Chi-Square statistic was used to

determine differences between the two groups of respondents for frequencies in their fit for each hypothesized pattern of attributions.

Results

Of the 107 teachers surveyed, 87 or 81.3% returned completed survey questionnaires. The high rate of return was attributed to the individual telephone contacts with teachers and with other professionals involved in the distribution process as well as the follow-up procedures of mailed post-cards to those teachers who did not respond to the first mailing. However, only 75 or 86.2% of the returned surveys were found to be valid and which accounted for 70.1% of the total number sampled.

Type of Respondents

When looking at the final sample size of who responded, special and regular education teachers were almost evenly divided. Special education teachers accounted for approximately 49% while regular education teachers accounted for about 50%. There were 39 special and 36 regular education teachers in the final sample.

When analyzing the respondents by class type, resource room special education teachers accounted for 11%; self-contained special education teachers accounted for 31%; and itinerant special education teachers accounted for 6.9% of the total group. Of the regular education teachers, elementary teachers accounted for almost 27% while middle school and junior high school teachers accounted for 23% of the total group. Overall, teachers

certified in elementary education outnumbered teachers certified in secondary education by a ratio of more than 2 to 1. Multiple certification was reflected in this ratio as some special and elementary education teachers were certified in more content subject areas than one.

Definition of Success and Failure

When analyzing the data provided for the definition of successful consultation outcomes, special education teachers were more inclined to define success through the regular education teacher while defining an almost equal amount of credit for themselves and other factors. Special education teachers also defined failure through the regular education teacher by a margin of 5 to 1.

A different behavior pattern in defining success was evident in the regular education teacher group as they tended to define success through all parties involved including the student and the school administration. Similarly, in the unsuccessful or failure condition, regular education teachers were more inclined to define failure more frequently through one party or factor. Evidence in this study suggested that even when attempting to define success or failure, both groups of teachers attributed the causes of consultation outcomes differently (see Table 1).

Type of Attributions

Similar frequency data on the type of attributions also suggested that special education teachers, as a group, were more

inclined to cite the regular education teacher as most responsible for success while attributing failure to the same by a margin of 6 to 1. However, in the successful outcome condition, regular education teachers, as a group, cited themselves as responsible for successful consultation outcomes slightly more frequently than special education teachers while attributing success to the special education teacher over other factors by a margin of 2 to 1. On the contrary, the same group cited other or external factors more frequently as responsible for a failed outcome by a margin of more than 2 to 1 (see Table 2). Statistical analyses indicated no significant differences were found between frequencies of the type of attributions by both teacher groups for successful outcomes, X^2 (2, N = 75) = 1.18, $p<.05$, X^2 (1, N = 65) = 3.62, $p<.05$ respectively.

Pattern of Attributions

When analyzing the data for the pattern of attributions by the two groups of respondents, significant differences were observed in the frequencies with which the special education teachers attributed blame for a failed consultation: X^2 (1, N = 38) = 14.51, $p<.05$, X^2 (2, N = 75) = 16.83, $p<.05$. Predictions have that both groups would attribute the causes for failure similarly in their consultation outcomes. Thus, computed proportions for both groups were predicted to fit the SE > E > RE pattern for the regular education teachers and the RE > E > SE pattern for the special education teachers (see Table 3).

Results, however, indicated that regular education teachers did not fit the hypothesized pattern of attribution in that they gave more blame to outside factors, then to their consulting partners, and then to themselves, i.e., $\underline{E} \geq \underline{SE} \geq \underline{RE}$ for a failed consultation outcome. Almost 72% of the special education teachers fit the hypothesized pattern of attribution for their group while only 28% of the regular education teachers fit the hypothesized pattern of attribution for their group. The differences observed in frequencies of fit were statistically significant (see Table 3).

This finding and the fact that a significant number of regular education teachers were attributing more blame to outside factors strongly suggests the existence of the actor perception in how they viewed the outcome of a failed consultation condition. In essence, the actor perception was validated for the regular education teacher in their tendency, as a group, to attribute the cause for failure to external factors more frequently than to other factors. Similarly, the observer perception of the special education teacher was validated in that they tended, as a group, to attribute the cause for failure to the regular education teacher, i.e., the actor, than to other factors.

For the special education teacher group, most also fit the pattern hypothesized for their perceptions for the direction of blame on a failed consultation outcome. It was predicted through attribution theory that special education teachers would blame

the regular education teacher for failed outcomes more frequently than outside factors, and more to outside factors than to themselves, i.e., RE ≥ E ≥ SE. Thus, these data suggests that special education teachers assumed the position of observer in their perception of the consultation outcome, even when they had some degree of involvement in the situation.

The differences in the attribution process by the two groups of teacher respondents indicated that position in the consultation relationship seemed to affect the perceptions of each teacher as they engaged in the consultation relationship. These results are consistent with the underlying principal of attribution theory that observers tend to attribute the cause of an event to the internal dispositions or internal attributes of the actor (Martin, 1983). The main focus of attention for the observer is the actor's internal, constant and enduring traits particularly for a failed outcome.

In this study, data indicated that most special education teacher respondents focussed on the internal dispositional traits of the regular education teacher to explain both success and failure conditions. This was evident in the concentration of character and dispositional type adjectives that were cited for explaining success and failure consultation conditions.

On the other hand, regular education teachers tended to attribute the majority of the blame for unsuccessful consultation outcomes to environmental conditions or other individuals

perceived to be external in nature from themselves in the attribution process. This also would include the special education student and other school personnel who would be part of the immediate environment. Results were significant for the unsuccessful outcome condition indicating that the two groups of teachers were encoding different cues from the consultation process and relationship. The main focus of attention for the regular education teachers was the environment as indicated by the type and pattern of attributions made for their consultation outcomes. Because of the different pattern and type of attributions made by the two types of teacher respondents, the presence of the fundamental attribution error effect was noted in this study.

For successful consultation outcomes, however, no significant differences were observed for the two groups of teachers. Both special and regular education teachers attributed the causes of success to themselves and to their consulting partners more than to external factors. These results are also consistent with the principle of attribution theory in that individuals would attribute the causes for successes more to themselves indicating a self-serving biased effect for the pattern and type of attributions.

Discussion

The results of this study indicated that both groups of teachers perceived their consultation outcomes differently. This was particularly true when respondents were asked to view failed

consultation outcomes. No differences were observed for the successful consultation outcomes although theoretical predictions of perceptions for both types of teachers were correct. These results support the contention made by attribution theorists in that the actor-observer perceptual difference exists when individuals are participating in assumed role situations and particularly when successful or failed outcomes could be determined (Bar-Tal & Frieze, 1976; Frieze, 1976; Frieze & Weiner, 1971).

In this study, special education teacher respondents more frequently attributed failed consultation outcomes to regular education teachers. This pattern of attribution seemed to indicate that special education teachers have high expectations for regular education teachers to help or put forth the effort in the process of effecting mainstreaming through teacher consultations. The perceived reliance on effort as a causal attribution by special education teachers in this study is consistent with empirical evidence that support the difference in perceptions occurring between actors and observers (Bar-Tal & Frieze, 1976).

On the other hand, regular education teachers more frequently attributed failed consultation outcomes to external factors other than to themselves. This attribution pattern was evident in their frequent citations for external factors for failure. Perhaps, regular education teachers in this study perceive the consultation process to be more of a cooperative

endeavor and that failed outcomes should be equally attributed to all parties involved. This pattern of attribution also is consistent with empirical evidence.

In this study, very few teachers attributed the cause for failure to themselves indicating that personal effort may have been exerted for consultations but the reality of mainstreaming could have been misunderstood. This misunderstanding could be related to specific process requirements such as expecting the regular education teacher to individualized instruction for the student, managing behavior problems, and taking on the responsibility for the student's progress and development. And, perhaps both types of teachers were unaware of the complexities for effecting mainstreaming. Special educators expect regular education teachers to work effectively with the students basing their judgments on comparable teacher abilities and training skills, while regular education teachers expected a lot of system support on various levels in the process.

The patterns and types of attributions observed in this study points to the need for more collaboration in the consulting process. Conflicts between teachers in the mainstreaming process would continue if teachers are not made aware of the natural inclination for their attribution processes. The pervasive behavior of attributing failure more frequently to others could be the stumbling blocks when developing basic collegial relationships. Furthermore, respondents in this study rarely took

responsibility for their own actions and participation in the consulting process.

Perhaps, teacher training should focus in helping both types of teachers to become more aware of their own attributes and their behaviors in the consultation process. Furthermore, teacher training professionals should help make teachers realize that their own behaviors could account for success or failure in consultation activities.

In the schools and particularly for the process of mainstreaming, potential problems for conflict frequently occur between teachers (Idol-Maestas & Ritter, 1985; Idol-Maestas, Paolucci-Whitcomb, & Nevin, 1986). These conflicts may be due to perceptual differences in the attribution process, and, as proven in this study, both types of teachers behave differently in the attribution process for blame. If the special education teacher consistently perceives failure as caused by the regular educator and not something that could have been personally contributed in the consultation process, then the lack of effective communication between professionals would always occur. But if special educators balance their perceptions by doing some self-analysis and evaluating their own behaviors in the consultation relationship, then some level of trust could be determined to effect mainstreaming on a functional level.

This could also be said of regular educators. Instead of viewing that the system should provide all the support, the notion of self-analysis and evaluation plus the exertion of

personal effort could all help provide for an internal support system that would lead to confidence building when working with mainstreamed students.

The validation of the actor-observer perception in the consultation relationship between teachers points to a direction for some understanding in the attribution process, particularly for teachers involved. If both teachers are perceiving the consultation outcome differently, then teacher training programs should provide course work for potential teacher-consultants to learn more about the attribution process and the roles it plays in perception. In addition, understanding the perceptual process could help teachers determine the best approaches to the consultation process by skillfully predicting what behaviors could result as a consequence of their actions. Thus, the notion of avoiding conflicts within consultation situations could help ease a student's transition into the mainstream of regular education because teachers know the types and patterns of attributions that would cause potential success or failure in their consultation relationships.

There is a need for further research investigations into the attribution process that occur between teachers who engage in consultation activities. Particular attention should be paid to evaluating those personal attributes that deter or effect individuals to perform upon request especially for the process of mainstreaming. Specific types of attribution made by teachers in this study indicate that certain characteristics and professional

qualities are essential and desirable for consulting successfully.

The behaviors of the two types of teachers during the attribution process also have indicated that role or position plays an important part in determining consultation outcomes. The manner by which teachers perceive outcomes for their efforts in consultation could help determine the causes for success or failure during the mainstreaming process. Thus, teachers who are aware of their own attribution behaviors could better their consultation activities and develop trusting relationships. Understanding the attribution process could only help improve consultation relationships between teachers.

Table 1

Factors Cited for Credit or Blame When Defining Consultation Outcomes

	Frequencies*			
Group (N = 75)	Consultant	Consultee	Student	Other
Special Education				
Success (credit)	20	36	24	6
Failure (blame)	7	37	2	4
Regular Education				
Success (credit)	29	28	26	6
Failure (blame)	14	11	9	9

* Reflects more than one citation from some respondents for causality of consultation outcomes.

Table 2

Factors Cited for Credit or Blame for Type of Attributions on Consultation Outcomes

	Frequencies			
Group (N = 75)	Consultant	Consultee	Student	Other
Special Education				
Success (credit)	16	35	8	59
Failure (blame)	5	31[a]	13	49
Regular Education				
Success (credit)	27	30	10	67
Failure (blame)	12	11[b]	25	48

* Reflects more than one citation from some respondents for causality of consultation outcomes.

Note: Frequencies with subscripts differ significantly at $p<.05$.

Table 3

Patterns of Attributions by Respondents on Consultation Outcomes

		Frequencies	
Group (N = 75)	Pattern	YES	NO
Special Education			
Success	SE > RE > E	31	8
Failure	RE > E >SE	28[a]	11
Regular Education			
Success	RE > SE > E	34	2
Failure	SE > E >RE	10[b]	26

Note: Frequencies with different superscripts differ significantly at $p<.05$. SE stands for Special Education consultant; RE stands for Regular Education consultee; and E stands for external or other factors outside the consultation relationship.

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